

On Design Research and Game Design

“Design” is an immaterial system, like a spirit, that is difficult to feel and create.

by pilleater



“Homeworlds” by Andy Looney

Perhaps it is a good time now to share with my followers what I majored in graduate school. My graduate degree was invested into a discipline called "design research, writing, and criticism," but can be simplified as just "design research."

This is what the Wikipedia articles defines it as...

“Design research was originally constituted as primarily research into the process of design, developing from work in [design methods](#), but the concept has been expanded to include research embedded within the process of design, including work concerned with the context of designing and research-based design practice. The concept retains a sense of generality, aimed at understanding and improving design processes and practices quite broadly, rather than developing domain-specific knowledge within any professional field of design.”

Now “Design” is "to create purpose, a plan, or intention that exists or thought to exist behind an action, fact, or material object." It could also be the procedures, techniques, aids or tools for designing. “Designing” is to decide upon the look and functioning of the object and the system, with or without a specific purpose or intention in mind.

What could exactly be the methods of design? We must ask how vague the definition of "design" is.

Is design art?

Is all art a form of design?

This is a paradox and conundrum that follows "labor is the source of all value." And if so, art must also be labor, and therefore "everything is art."

I really despise this statement made by fellow art students and teachers, as I believe there is a limit to our understanding and our definitions towards art. We must pay respect to the semantics, language, and logic that must follow.

And so, **“art” is not design! But design can be an art.**

I strongly advocate, that **design is immaterial. Design cannot be physical.** It is rather something taking place in our minds and being executed into our reality.

About three years ago, I made similar arguments about game design in a series of YouTube videos. If design is immaterial, it is also impossible to display “design” in a museum. You can have TVs displaying video games, and board games on top of pedestals, but we human beings cannot see that spiritual design in front of them, especially in game design. Only the gamer can feel the [“ludo-textual”](#) experience of design and criticize it. **Design does not have a physical presence.** Therefore, design has nothing to do with its aesthetics or political ideology attached to it (How can it?). Rather, **design is like a machine, a computer, that follows an algorithm of sorts.** Design, I argue, should also belong in the analytical canon of Western Art and philosophy.

My focus in graduate school was on tabletop game design. As much as I hate the word "tabletop," I prefer the classic "board" game design. (That genealogy of the word “tabletop” deserves its own essay). "Game design" has become a vague notion since the dominate medium for games relies on the virtual and digital. Those who want to be game designers have great misconceptions about this vagueness. A bunch of so-called “game designers” actually want to program video games, be an art director, be the producer, rather than to actually create a design for the game itself. **A game is a system of play which has unpredictable outcomes and uncertainty who wins or loses.** If said game didn't have a win or lose condition, it's rather a toy. And if a game had an ultimate solution to its system, it's rather a puzzle. (And most video games these days are actually puzzles with animated commercials). I could go on with a digression about the definition of games, but I would like to make clear, is that **I am interested in designing games as a system**, where this immaterial system does not have aesthetics nor ideology. To put it in a humorous way, $2 + 2 = 4$ is a fact. Those who argue for $2 + 2 = 5$, is something that our neoliberal capitalist regime is advocating. “Design” for them means “advancing minorities and colored people to operate nonwhite businesses through game design.”

I am also quite aware that the game design scene and subculture of "gamers" has tainted the discipline of game design and in a very bad way. Of course everyone enjoys games, but gamers often only desire a certain subcultural consumption and ideology that follows. I disassociate with gamer culture and anything to do with soyboy nu males. In fact, [by just taking a look on how corrupted the gaming journalist business is](#), so-called “game designers” and the subservient “gamer” class are in an echo-chamber, not knowing what design really is.

I see myself as an avant-garde artist, belonging to an analytical philosophical tradition that criticizes art and which associates myself with high-minded people who not only play games, but also read books, exercise, and who are politically incorrect.

Don't get me wrong, I believe Gamergate was a real, controversial event. But I dissociated myself from video gamers and of video games. The true purpose of video games is to provide a program, a computer, of a game that could be played in reality, or something that cannot be done in the real of the physical. Video games today are animated cartoons bent on Asian-brainwashing for the masses.

I've also given up many times on the board game culture in America. It's target demographic seems to be neckbeard families who remember the good old days of the 1980s And to also mention, Tom Vasel is a

hideous consumer of sorts that reflects the decline of the American person. True Grogards and esoteric European game designers are one in a million in this scene. In the American scene, the only true game designer we tend to worship is Richard Garfield, designer of Magic: The Gathering. But in my own criticism, he comes off as a repressed Asiansexual and an arrogant rich kid who's a lot of time on his hands.

“Game design” is a recent phenomena that has happened in the last four decades. There's a lot to go over on what game design is compared to “design,” but I'd rather like to focus on my own interest and definitions of design instead. I see game design as nothing more than games revolving around the discipline of design. So rather, we should examine the art of design.

“Design research,” if you were to follow a strict definition, means new approaches to crafty innovations and problem solving. This in turn could create new interfaces where the audience actually appreciates the designer's contribution. It's kind of like those who enjoy and appreciate architectural design, naming every idol and technique in the scene. The game designer is like a programmer, creating an immaterial system or interface, where the audience can use the system to interact with each others. Simple design mechanics found in Tinder, a smartphone, or exploring the virtual world of Minecraft, all contribute to technology and of the arts. However, **most normative people see aesthetics** and not the immaterial system behind it. Conceptual art, Oulipo, and math teachers have tried to force a design appreciation in their studies. There is still no luck with the simple pleasures of the public. It is quite difficult to tell the normal person that they could enjoy something they cannot see. Only a few designers, programmers, mathematicians and analytical philosophers actually enjoy the immaterial and appreciate its beauty and sophistication.

Most postmodern professors will try and tell you that there is no such thing as beauty, and that beauty is ultimately fascistic. I just nod my head and say, “I am a fascist. I love beauty.” As another example found in philosophy, there is much more student interest in the continental school than of the analytical, because of how difficult and stiff logic and language can be. A sad continental philosopher just has to say something ridiculous as “power structures exist in a patriarchy” without any connection towards a verified system of it, and then all the teenagers flock to such popularity games. Richard Rorty once said that the main problem of the political left was its deep interest into the continental and its ignorance towards the analytical. I believe in this same Rortyism in the discipline of design research and of game design.

Chances are, most people are uneducated about what is design and how to create designs. The truth may be, just like board game design, most people jump into game design and create mimesis art of their favorite game and thus a subculture around it.

“[Design studies](#)” is mainly an English discipline, and you less likely see it in America. It is a common trope to see a copy of the *The Design of Everyday Things* on top of their bookshelf, or at least the word “design” being attached to any existing book. The pathetic Design Researcher is kind of like a Satin Bowerbirds that only collects blue things for the rest of its life. Why? It's just in its supposed nature. Because of this incredible boredom the design teacher has, one is likely to shift towards something irrelevant and claim *it has something to do with design*. Just think about it, there are many disciplines like Marxism, feminism, colonialism, and all that stuff you get with a classic postmodern education. But design is ultimately isolated from such material ideologies. Only then to start hearing paranoid topics like “the design of paranoid suicide bombers” or “the design of colonialism oppressing latinx people at my local museum.”

Inside game design, there's two different schools, Ludology and Narratology. I see myself as a Ludologist, as someone who sees the analytical, logical system behind all the superficial aesthetics and product marketing. And on the opposite end, you have the Narratologist, who believe games are vessels, or machines, to be novels. It is ironic because the Narratology could have just become a novelist instead, but assumes now that games are tricky fads that is forcefully going to tell their arrogant novel for the unwilling participant, who could have actually just picked up a book instead! The Ludologist understands that games are systems of play, where interactivity happens between two or more human beings, not from an AI or puzzle that has yet to be solved. This is where games are unpredictable, and are outside the realm of puzzles and toys.

With this knowledge, It is difficult to design such a game that the Ludologist admires. I have my biases and I have my desires, but I would rather create a new board game design similar to those “post-elegant” (or pre-elegant) designs I grew up around and actively still play. It’s just that good game designs is something rare to come across, and not something found by discovery.

On the opposite end of celebrating design, I have my concern that design can also be a form of social control. This is also ironic, because how can an immaterial system become politically ideological? Well, it is true that smartphones started out from a proposed design, but now we are constantly addicted and glued to the screens of our these devices. The design world celebrates such decadence as an accomplishment! In other words, design brought the smartphone into existence, and the celebration of this kind of negative design is infecting and influencing the way we are thinking about the future of design.

As a comparative example, it's just like how negative, or bad, board game designs become fashionable every so decade. When Dominion came out in 2008, all of a sudden, every professional game designers wanted to design a "deck building game." So everyone made a clone card game similar to Dominion where players constantly gather resource cards and shuffle their decks, constantly. The design was actually redundant, silly, and its celebration was worse than the Beanie Baby fad. To this day, Eurogames are still cloning each other, creating one puzzle after another with no end in sight. The zeitgeist is often a reflection of the culture that consumes in said products, followed by their ethics and morality. Again, this eventually leads outside the discipline of design and into that of philosophy. Name a Eurogamer who is an expert in Spinoza. I guarantee you will not find it. I still see all these bad Eurogames, or “hybrid” games coming out, advocating the decadence of board game culture, where all victory conditions are based upon the highest score, where the action point allowance system dictates a false sense of freedom, and ultimately games are nothing more than edible puzzles, never to be played again once it is solved. Let the dust cover the game on its shelf.

I also have strong criticisms on the word and concept of “Elegance” brought upon by Dieter Rams. This is an arrogant assumption that the complicated and sophisticated should be trimmed down for the stupid masses. Again, this is where design is being used as a method of social control. Apple iPhones and Skinner boxes destroy Design research, as design becomes a puzzle that is solved. And so too game design is having less “interaction” between a humans. We don't even have a correct definition of interaction anymore, and it’s rather “interaction” becomes a skewed definition of interaction between a human and artificial intelligence. Chris Crawford wrote a few amazing books with regards to interactivity and game design, and still celebrities like Eric Zimmerman seem to think interactivity is a verb, and not something that is exclusive between two or more organic human beings.

The semantic games get worse for these design nerds. Now there are silly spin-offs like “design thinking,” where someone in at a white-collar board meeting pushes the “design” that maybe "black feminism will benefit through this board game based upon safe sex and where abortion clinics are available." Ultimately, this reeks of Tim Cook-CEO-talk of pitching ways to socially control people. Just like how capitalism works, everything exist within supply and demand cycles, where there is only hypothetical fads and trends, where design research tries to capture such fleeting popularity contests to make profit.

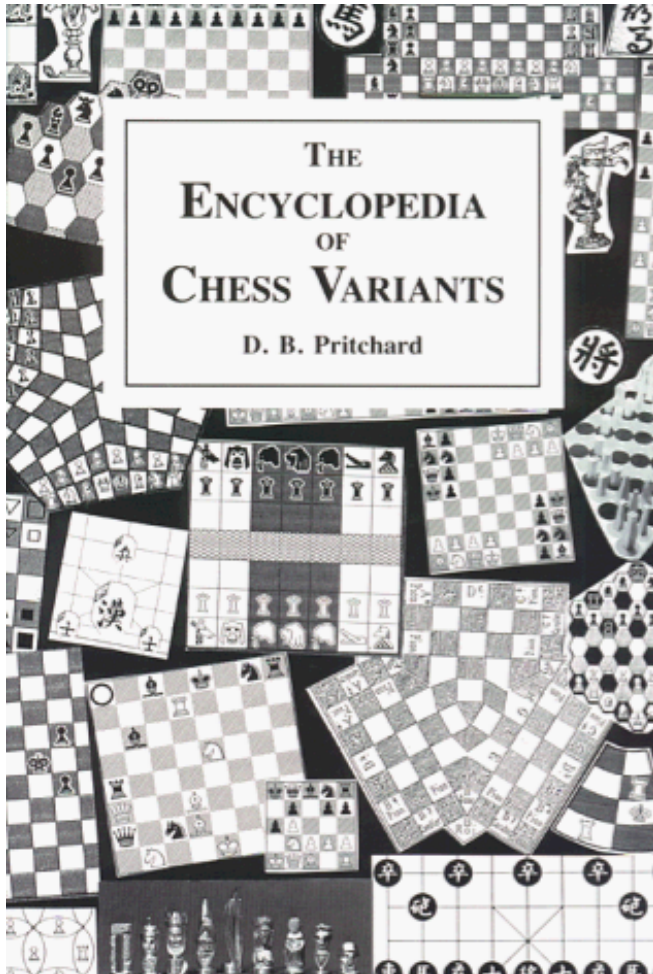
I'm willing to argue here that great game designers, like Sid Sackson, Leo Colovini, Wolfgang Kramer, even Andy Looney all have contributed to the way we think about games and design, where each character can fully express their artistic individualism inside a logical system of play. There's only a few people like me that appreciate this immaterialism of the mind than aesthetics or political ideology.

The best way one can feel, enjoy, and desire design, is through physical board games and/or reading role-playing game rulebooks. Think for a second about the concept of chess notation. Chess requires a board and its figures to play the game. But it is also possible that two human beings can play chess **through their mind** by speaking of game commands only. There might not be a physical board in front of them, but in their minds they can record and track what is happening. The immaterial design is being executed by humans. When someone buys a new board game, and reads the rules for the first time, **the design is being executed during**

play. Design in board games can only be read, felt and criticized through what Paul Booth calls the “ludo-textual.”

I challenge my fellow artists to think about design as this immaterial spirit, and try to think of, or even create, designs which can change the way we think about ourselves and of the arts.

Games are great ways for us to be social, and to interact with one another, and to express ourselves as individuals and artists. It is only possible by celebrating those **designs** and **the people who create them.**



D.B. Pritchard knew Chess was merely just a system of cultural and artistic variants of play, hence design

...Now I leave a little riddle for the rest of you.

Here is a recorded game notation of a previous played game of Homeworlds. (Designed by Andy Looney).

This immaterial system is a beautiful design. Even this game record shows how sophisticated Homeworlds can be.

Do some research on the game, and see if you can figure out what is going on. This is a full game with a start and conclusion between two players.

All of it, without the physical, could be played in mind, only by speaking these commands.

Just read it:

h,y2C,b3C,g3C

h,y1C,b2C,g3B

b,g1A,1

b,g1B,2

t,g1A,y1B

d,g1B,y3C

b,g1A,1

d,g1B,y1A

b,y2A,1

b,g1C,4

b,g2A,1

m,g1B,1;c,g,1

t,y2A,g2C

d,g1C,y2B

d,g2C,b1C

d,g1C,b1B

b,g1A,6

b,g1B,7

b,g2A,6

t,g1C,y1A

t,g2C,y2B

b,y2A,7

b,y3A,6

m,y2A,1

t,y1B,g1C

m,g1B,1

d,g1A,y3C

m,y1A,1

d,g2A,g3C

b,g2B,1

t,g1C,b1B

s,g2B;b,y1B,1;b,y3B,1

c,y,1;b,g1C,8

b,g2B,1

s,y3A;m,g1C,2;m,g1A,2;m,g2A,2;c,g,2

GO

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-pilleater

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